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ECUMENICAL OFFICERS HEAR MARRIAGE SURVEY REPORT

by Barbara Leix Braver
Editor, Episcopal Times

BOSTON -- Does either Church offer particular help and support when a Roman Catholic and an Episcopalian marry? The answer to this question would have to be an emphatic NO! based on a study just released by a joint standing committee of the ecumenical officers of both Churches.

The report on marriages between Episcopalians and Roman Catholics was released during a meeting of the ecumenical officers of the two Churches which was held here in conjunction with the 18th annual National Workshop on Christian Unity, May 4-7. The workshop drew more than 450 people from around the country, a large percentage of whom were Episcopalians and Roman Catholics.

The report on inter-faith marriages was based on the results of an in-depth survey of 191 individuals; some on-site visits were also made by the committee.

"We blunder in with the best of intentions and succeed in making a difficult situation impossible for the couples involved," asserted the Rev. Leonel L. Mitchell, professor of liturgics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ill. Mitchell addressed a joint session of the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers and the Roman Catholic counterparts in the North American Diocesan Ecumenical Officers.

Inter-Church families are the "victims" of the difficulty between Churches. "It is not helpful for pastors or families to assume responsibility for the divisions of Western Christendom," Mitchell said.

The inability to share the Eucharist and the religious education of children are two of the most painful issues the couples said they face.

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According to the study, a sizable number of respondents feel that "the Church is not sensitive to their personal needs and feelings while at the same time it puts undue stress on the theological and canonical considerations that seem abstract and irrelevant to them. This study seems to indicate further that the laity are becoming restive and impatient, at times even angry, with the Church as an institution."

Even though the sample of Episcopal-Roman Catholic couples was not randomly selected (each couple was recommended by an ecumenical officer and one might therefore expect them to have a strong Church connection), the problems experienced in their inter-faith marriages seem to erode their connection with the institutional Church. As the study report said: "Family unity based on faith in a common Lord is complicated by demands for unswerving loyalty to one's denominational requirements. An insoluble situation often results in the Church being reduced to a purely organizational and administrative construct. The Church seems to be the problem and, therefore, may be relegated to a very secondary role in order that the positive good of a Christian marriage may be realized."

Mitchell told the assembled ecumenical officers that attempts to see that the couple remain in the fold often results in the non-practice of both parties. "(Even) as a matter of tactics, we must ask if our systems are doing what they are set up to do. It doesn't matter much what Church they stay home from."

The study showed that many couples, and their children, attend both Churches. Though some children are educated completely within one of the faiths, just as frequently they are part of both traditions -- perhaps reflecting the ambivalent feelings of their parents.

The study did point to one possible difficulty in having the children attend both Churches. "The religious education of children and their further sacramental participation (confirmation, communion, etc.) are often determined by what may seem best to the parents at that particular time. Many children, therefore, like their parents, are practicing members of both Churches. Unlike their parents, however, the children have no background roots of identity and are less able to find a real spiritual home in either Church."

Problems in what used to be called "mixed marriages" (particularly in the Catholic tradition) are not new. But, the study did uncover a recent trend. "What is new is the extent to which many of the partners of an Episcopal-Roman Catholic marriage are solving the problem for themselves and their families by ignoring the rules of their respective Churches. This indication of where many of our people are at the present time underlines the urgency to come to grips with the issues raised in our study."

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This study is the third of a series of the joint standing committee of the two organizations. The two previous studies were The Lived Experience: A Survey of U.S. A/RC Covenants and Tale of Three Cities: A Study of U.S. A/RC Covenants. All three studies are available by writing the Rev. Canon Harold G. Hultgren, 4112 West Washington Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90018. The charge for each is \$2.50.

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